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ABSTRACT

How to attract and retain adult students remains an enduring question for adult education providers. Recent research sheds light on adult learners' unique learning goals, needs, and aspirations and offers guidance on recruiting and retaining adult learners. Adult students' participation and persistence in educational activities is a complex phenomenon involving situational, dispositional, and institutional factors. Because adult participation is shaped by access to program information, recruitment should be viewed as a multistep process of drawing people into programs. Adult education providers must market their programs. Many view orienting adult students to educational programs as the first step toward retention. Adult students need full information about the relevant details of educational programs. Adults in distance education degree programs need information about the technology and procedures used to provide content and establish and maintain communication. Adult students also need information on services available to help them meet their individual needs. Early and continuous follow-up and attention, both inside and outside the classroom, form a constant theme in adult student retention. Beginning with recruitment, the adult learner should be seen as a partner in a learning process that builds on motivations, counsels rather than tests, emphasizes relevance, and recognizes resistance. (Contains 23 references.) (MN)

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PRACTICE APPLICATION BRIEF NO. 18

Adult Students: Recruitment and Retention

by Michael E. Wonacott
2001

How to attract and retain adult students is an enduring question for providers of adult education. Adult students must juggle competing demands on their time from study, family, work, and other commitments; their learning goals are often different from those of educational institutions and providers; and their needs and aspirations may change during the education process, sometimes as a result of it. This *Brief* reviews recent research related to adult student recruitment and retention and provides guidelines for recruiting and retaining adult learners.

Adult Students and Persistence

Adult students' participation and persistence in educational activities ranging from adult literacy to doctoral programs is a complex phenomenon involving an array of factors. Adults are often affected by situational factors beyond their control—job, health problems, financial problems, legal problems, personal or family problems (Belzer 1998). Likewise, dispositional factors such as expectations, self-esteem, level of family support, and past educational experience, can be barriers to participation (Hubble 2000). Institutional factors such as red tape, program fees, scheduling, and procedures can either help or hinder participation (Quigley 1998). In fact, adult students who drop out are often actually "stopping out"—that is, interrupting their studies but planning to return (Frank and Gaye 1997)—or attending other institutions (Hoffman and Elias 1999).

Recruitment

Adult participation is shaped by access to program information; recruitment should be viewed as a multistep process of drawing people into programs rather than motivating them to sign up for a single course (Bond, Merrill, and Smith 1997). That process begins with promotional information to prompt participant contact; it continues with a prompt response to initial contacts, providing details by phone or print, and inviting potential participants to a local information session. Follow-up on initial contact is crucial; one study of adults who contacted literacy programs found that the most common reason for not enrolling was not getting a call back (Long 2001).

Promotional materials should be inexpensive and eye-catching. They should provide basic information that speaks to potential participants—for example, "It's fun, it's free, it's local and there's assistance with child care" (Bond, Merrill, and Smith 1997, p. 9); and they should stress the nonschool nature of programs. Program information can also be provided in face-to-face contacts—knocking on doors in local neighborhoods or staffing an information booth at a community fair (Lankard, Nixon-Ponder, and Imel 1995), on the shop floor (Hellman 1995), or in neighborhood churches, unions, or human services agencies (Gerardi and Smirni 1996).

Essentially, adult education providers need to *market* their programs (Michael and Hogard 1996). Marketing includes defining a mission statement, developing measurable program objectives, identifying discrete market segments, developing a marketing mix of specific programs for specific market segments, and conducting promotional activities tailored to target segments. In particular, adult educators should avoid the mistake of assuming that everyone understands the benefits of education, especially literacy education; the intent of marketing should be to inform.

Orientation for Retention

Orienting adult students to educational programs is viewed by many as the first step toward retention. Adult students reporting a specific goal for adult education activities show increased persistence compared to those without one (Comings, Parrella, and Soricone 1999). An orientation can provide a wide range of program and other information that allows adult students to make informed decisions and establish realistic goals and assess their own circumstances.

Program Information

Adult students need full information about the relevant details of education programs—purpose, goals, activities, responsibilities, schedule, logistics, and so on. For example, adult basic education (ABE) students often need information about credentials like the General Educational Development (GED), including what the GED is, its value in the labor market, and alternative credentials available (Jensen et al. 2000). In addition, ABE students often need to understand the reason for acquiring knowledge and skills they see as academic and not relevant to their own lives; they may need to know specifically how learning percentages or geometry can improve the quality of their lives (Pritza 1998). Likewise, adults participating in workplace education programs need to know not only about program content and its relevance to their lives but also about program policy and employer intentions—for example, that programs are offered not to identify low-skill workers but solely to improve worker skills and that classroom work remains confidential unless otherwise specified (Virginia Adult Education Workplace Workgroup 1997).

Similarly, adults in distance education degree programs need information about the technology and procedures used to provide content and establish and maintain communication (Chyung, Winiecki, and Fenner 1998; Nelson 1999). Even adult students in traditional, on-campus doctoral programs need clear and full information about the process, milestones, and time frame for completing their research, dissertation, and degree (Kehrhahn, Sheckley, and Travers 1999). All in all, programs must ensure they provide whatever information their adult students need to form clear, realistic expectations, set targets, and monitor progress.

Other Information

Adult students also need information on services available to help them meet their individual needs. Adult literacy program participants may need to know about support services (e.g., child care, transportation, health care, employment) provided by the program or community or human services agencies (Rettinger 1996). Adult students at postsecondary institutions need information about the range of academic and student services available (e.g., financial aid, tutorials, academic advising, counseling), particularly career counseling, career exploration, and job placement (Baker 1998). Students need to know about any specific program services offered—writing clinics, support groups, task teams, seminars, regular meetings, or listservs (Gerardi and Smirni 1996; Kehrhahn, Sheckley, and Travers 1999).

Self-Assessment

Adult students often need to assess themselves and their own circumstances realistically. Adult college students, for example, may need to assess their own cognitive and affective readiness for learning (Chyung, Winiecki, and Fenner 1998). ABE students may need to assess their own educational and employment goals in light of the local labor market (Jensen et al. 2000). Even adult students who have already decided what goals to pursue reported that in-depth, interactive goal-setting orientation activities helped them gain confidence and identify what areas to work on first (Snider 1999).

Follow-Up for Retention

Early and continuous follow-up and attention, both inside and outside the classroom, form a constant theme in adult student retention. Quigley (1998) calls for both teacher and counselor immediacy—that is, prompt response to adult learners' needs to sustain motivation, particularly in the first 3 weeks; teachers and counselors should initiate contact because some adult students will not request assistance. Such program features as seminars, work groups, support groups, and cohorts can serve as a natural forum for follow-up contact (Cunningham 1996; Kehrhahn, Sheckley, and Travers 1999).

Beginning with recruitment, the adult learner should be seen as a partner in a learning process that builds on motivations, counsels rather than tests, emphasizes relevance, and recognizes resistance (Jensen et al. 2000). Adult education providers must also make a commitment to adult student retention with specific goals, effective tracking systems, timely reports of at-risk indicators, and a strengthened advisory system with clearly defined staff responsibilities and standards (Ben-Joseph, Ryan, and Benjamin 1999). A wider definition of persistence that includes interrupted educational activities is needed "to allow practitioners to focus on helping adults become persistent learners who use episodes of program participation as critical parts of a comprehensive learning strategy" (Comings, Parrella, and Soricone 1999, p. 66).

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